'You can move your body to a beat and have a cabbage in your head' – Jason Pierce

Their debut LP, 'Lazer Guided Melodies', is one of this year's most accomplished and adventurous records but will Spiritualized's legendary reticence scupper their deserved success? STEVE SUTHERLAND investigates this and other pressing questions pertaining to The Life Of the Mind. Pics: TOM SHEEHAN

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SPIRITUALIZED

PLANET SWEET

SOME of my friends shocked me lately. They hated "Barton Fink". They said they didn't see the point. It didn't have a purpose. It didn't have a plot. It changed its mind halfway through. It didn't have a meaning and they couldn't work out what was supposed to have happened at the end. They felt frustrated. Was the f***ing head in the box or what?

We argued a lot about it. I thought it was a marvellous film. I felt enriched where they felt cheated. I felt stimulated where they felt stymied. When they said, "Where's the ending?", I said, "There is no ending". When they asked "Why", I said, "Uh . . . because life's like that." And cynics that they are, they laughed.

As we knocked it back and forth, it became apparent that what we were talking about was not so much what "Barton Fink" didn't do as what most other films did. Where my friends chose to see one self-consciously arty, stylish and enigmatic movie, I pictured the horrific vision of Hollywood pouring out movies which so efficiently spoonfed their audiences their reactions and responses that most people were no longer in the habit of thinking for themselves.

I only mention this because Jason Pierce feels much the same way about the state of music. Of course he didn't exactly say so. Not in so many words anyway. Jason is a legendarily reluctant interviewee. "I've got ideas of what I want to say and what I want to do but, as soon as the tape goes on, all this shit comes out and I can't stop myself halfway through," he says. "It's not even that I believe . . . uh . . . there you go, it's started. Hahahaha."

No, Jason's not about to jettison the cheesy grin that's doubtless got him off the hook since childhood. He's not about to sound forth on the evils of Techno or the worrying rehabilitation of heavy metal. But get him talking about Spiritualized, get him engrossed in the nuts and bolts of "Lazer Guided Melodies", their debut LP, and he's as surprised as you are about what emerges.

"People seem to think we've taken ages over this record but we haven't. We recorded the album in a few weeks in 1990 and tried to mix it in the middle of last year, but we all hated the mixes. It just took a long time to convince the record company to allow us to go back and completely remix it.

"You see, basically, there was nothing wrong with the recorded sounds but it was mixed in a kind of pop way that goes, 'Here's a good bit, you're gonna listen to this', whereas I wanted the mix to work so that you discover things for yourself and none of the 'best' sounds or the 'cool' sounds are pushed forward. We didn't want to force the levels of the choruses or anything. We wanted the kind of mix where, a year after listening, people suddenly realise there's another instrument – like a piano – in this song that they've listened to over and over."

In other words, "Lazer Guided Melodies" is the "Barton Fink" of LPs.

THE tape's off and, over a pint of Old Badger's Bum or somesuch real ale in a hostelry close to the photo studio, Jason tells me a story which, it later occurs to me, sums up the attitude of "Lazer Guided Melodies" pretty well.

Jason says: "Have you ever been to that place near Piccadilly Circus, the place where they have all the waxworks of pop stars and that?"

The Trocadero?

"Yeah, I think that's it. It's f***ing incredible. Like, you go in and they give you these headphones to wear and, like, as you pass Elvis you'll hear 'Hound Dog' and then, as you walk on to The Beatles, you'll hear 'She Loves You' or something. It's really weird but the weirdest thing of all is, if you take your headphones off, everyone else is singing their heads off at the tops of their voices!"

He laughs at the absurdity of all these people being so caught up in the music that they don't know that they're making complete fools of themselves. He's also delighted and amazed that music can have such an effect, which is pretty much what "Lazer Guided Melodies" is about – total immersion."

Presented to the public as two LP's to be played at 45rpm for better sound quality, or as one CD with only four track breaks to represent where the records need turning over, "LGM" is meant to be a complete experience. Jason loathes the idea of making singles and is disappointed that Spiritualized have released four – a cover of The Troggs' "Anyway That You Want Me", the 13-minute long mood-piece "Feel So Sad", "Run", which borrowed some lyrics from JJ Cale, and "Why Don't You Smile Now", an early Lou Reed/John Cale number. It's not that he's ashamed of them or anything, it's just that they were only recorded as a means to going out and playing live which, along with recording albums, is the only way Jason can really see his music having the desired effect upon people.

And the desired effect is? Well, against Jason's better judgement, I amputate the final track, "200 Bars", and bare it for discussion. E Kate Radley, the keyboard player and, coincidentally Jason's girlfriend, counts from one to 200 while the song slowly builds, note by note, beat by beat. It's about boozing. And it's funny. The pun really works.

Jason agrees: "Yeah, I think it's funny. We were in stitches when we recorded it. Obviously it's 200 bars of music and it seemed right to put the counting voice in because, initially, the emphasis was on bars as in American bars and I think it's too good to just be a drinking song.

"It's cool because the idea is that you can lose yourself in 200 bars of music as well as in 200 bars drinking."

And, as a microcosm of the entire album's ethic, that's perfectly accurate. "Lazer Guided Melodies" says you can lose yourself in music just as you can lose yourself in love or hate or booze or drugs or religion. It says that music can have the same effect. It can save or devastate, destroy or comfort you, let you escape or bring you into direct confrontation with your emotions. And it says that it is high time we started LISTENING to music again instead of being spoonfed our kneejerk reactions.

Except, of course, it doesn't actually SAY any of this. It's just music, like "Barton Fink" is just film. In fact, it's music about music and the power of music in the same way as "Barton Fink" is film about film and the power

of film. It refuses to become didactic. If it did it would defeat its own object and rob us of the richness of discovery and choice.

This is the primary source of frustration with Spiritualized – they won't betray their instincts to publicise their brilliance. "Lazer Guided Melodies" is easily one of the best, most adventurous, most fulfilling albums likely to be released this year and yet I fear Jason's reluctance to flog it – even to expound on it a little – might impede its progress into the public consciousness where it absolutely belongs.

All Jason has to do is to allow us to take it all a step further and Spiritualized will have arrived – we'll have a hook to hang them on. But he won't. He will never sanction our enthusiasm. When I ask him if it would be okay to say that "200 Bars" is, in fact, a comment on song cliches in general – the counting a comic counterpoint to the romantic drunk – he shrugs and sighs. When I praise him for the clever lyricism of "I Want You", which, like Dylan's "She Belongs To Me", says exactly the opposite of what it purports to say, he is pleased that I take it seriously, but . . .

"Yeah, I think there's a lot of that. Like, the last line of 'You Know It's True' is 'I love you' yet the whole lyric before that is 'I don't wanna be here'. It's like . . . I can't even remember the lyric to 'I Want You' so I can't comment any further."

There's a long pause. Jason smiles. I guess I ought to say something so I say that one of the things I really like about "Lazer Guided Melodies" is that the songs don't really seem to be about anything in particular and yet they're very easy to take to heart, to assimilate into your own life (unlike, say, the beatnik twaddle on the new Charlatans LP).

There's another long pause. Then Jason says, "Yes and no". Then he pauses again. Then he says: "Obviously the lyrics are there to be heard, they're not mixed into the track, they're not just something to create a more human kind of sound, there isn't singing there just purely to make people relate to the human voice. The lyrics are there and they're important to the album but I don't mind. I think it's cool if you get something from the lyrics that, say, I don't because it's part of the music and the music's there to give you feelings. As you say, they're not, like, that song is about that incident or anything."

Virtually the Gettysburg address, I think you'll agree!

"This band is different," he continues, surprisingly. "The Spacemen kind of took their cues from other people's music. A great deal of the Spacemen stuff took a cue from a Rolling Stones song, an Elevators song, almost like working around them. But, towards the end of Spacemen, it seemed like the stuff we were taking our cues from was a lot better known – people were being turned onto the Elevators, The Stooges and whatever, and I thought, rather than go looking for even more obscure and weird stuff that people won't pick up on so easily, why not do something with this band that isn't taking its obvious cues from the past?

"In a way, it's like, say, Brian Wilson. We didn't think, 'Hey, there's some really cool sounds on The Beach Boys records, let's nick them or use those instruments'. It's more the kinda way that Brian Wilson was writing and making those sounds from himself. This is making sounds from ourselves. It's like you can make a soul record using a soul keyboard and using Otis Redding's dictionary of soul noises or whatever, but I think we've made a soul record that hasn't used any of that kind of obvious stuff."

AH, Spacemen 3. I thought it best not to mention them but seeing as how Jason brought them up . . . they're a curse. I remember, way back in the arsequaking days, Melody Maker put Spacemen 3 on the cover and it was one of the worst selling issues in living memory. (Jason asks me about this later, and laughs – "That's because you put Sonic on the cover, not me.") The bad memory lingers.

Then there was all that boring press where, because the record company didn't know what to do with them, we started getting all this bitchy stuff where Sonic had a go at Jason and Jason responded as if anyone gave a shit. Spacemen 3 split. Big deal. I was never a fan. Jason smiles and says, "Thanks".

But the thing is, we don't really know how to behave around Spiritualized, do we? They don't really fit in with anybody's notion of the here-and-now or the great hereafter. They were asked to do the "Rollercoaster" tour but . . . well, they didn't exactly decline, they just didn't respond. Jason says he couldn't see why the Mary Chain were headlining every night and thought the whole thing smacked of, "The old school tie". Later he admits that he's not exactly *au fait* with the Mary Chain. He stopped listening to them, he says, when they began to be credited with all the stuff he thought Spacemen should have been credited for – feedback breakthrough, junkie cool, etc.

So is it okay to like Spiritualized? Bobby Gillespie doesn't think so. He cited a late Spacemen 3 gig as the most boring night of his life, as a direct consequence of which he was converted to House, recorded "Loaded" and changed the course of pop history.

"Yeah, well, I heard about that. That's his thing, y'know? That's what he wants to get into. I think people were dancing in their heads that night and maybe he missed it. Maybe he wanted to move his feet a bit. That's cool. Maybe he just missed the point that night. Maybe he wanted to be around a lot of people that were swaying their bodies. I mean, you can move your body to a beat and have a cabbage in your head. That's it, I guess."

But doesn't Jason worry about it?

"Uh, no."

"LAZER Guided Melodies" is special in that, whereas the making of most records is an act of extreme egotism – the singer performing on vinyl, fantasising, wanting to be noticed, begging to be approved of – there is very little character to Spiritualized. Just as my friends found it troublesome that there is no identifiable hero and no out-and-out villain in "Barton Fink" (the film itself is the star), so people might find it hard to accept a record which, in a way, is its own protagonist, its own reason to exist.

Jason sighs. "I guess . . . I don't know if that would come out in the music or whether that's the press. The two are so kind of close. Basically, I want as many people to hear this record as possible. It seems crazy to make a record like that and, when we're offered space in the Melody Maker or whatever, it seems crazy not to do the interviews. I'd rather not but . . . I dunno, some people can make crap music and still have a press persona – whether it's real or whether it's just turned on when you guys walk in the door, who knows? But, uh, I don't think we're interested in that. We'd much rather just make the records."

I assure Jason that it's not his press profile I'm talking about. It's just that the record doesn't play by the rules of commerce – it doesn't bend over backwards and scream, "Here I am, PLEASE buy me!"

"Uh, that makes sense but I don't know how to answer that. I don't know if it was even a question. Hahaha. The album is not just of this time – now, here it is, listen to it a few times and then go onto something else. It's been made for longevity. We wanted to make an album that is gonna sound as good in 10 years time as it does now. We deliberately set out to do that and I think it worked."

Jason talks as if he's achieved his goal already. Whatever next?

"Yeah," he laughs. "I know. It's a problem, isn't it? We want to play live and I think we're gonna get a show together that is gonna be f***ing great. That's the next stage."

He mentions how, in Japan, Psychic TV were given a room to play in where all four walls were totally made up of speakers. "Imagine how that must have sounded! I'd love something like that. I mean, I personally wouldn't wanna go and see Spiritualized and have them reproduce faithfully everything on that album, because I don't think that's what we want a live group to be.

"We want to take a horn section out with us. And maybe strings. The horn section will probably earn more on the whole tour than the band will. The band won't earn a penny but we wanna do it, y'know? When we did the Peel Session recently, we were blown away by the sound. Y'know, it wasn't like five people making music, it was like it was coming through the roof or something. And we want to take that out and do that kind of thing live."

I ask Jason if it gets stranger the more he plays. He glances up at the clock.

"Yeah . . . and . . . I have to move the car."

Kate, who's been listening in (quiet as a mouse except for crying with laughter when Jason perched himself on and collapsed the box that Sheehan uses to attain normal human height when he's smudging), volunteers to move the motor before they get a fine. I say I can't remember where we were.

"I was just about to not finish the sentence," Jason smirks.

Surely not! I know, I asked if it changes much live, night to night?

"Yeah, but like I've said before, it's almost like the sound isn't coming from the people on the stage, it's all around. It's coming down through the roof or something like that, which is much more exciting than just playing the parts on the guitar or something."

But Spiritualized aren't great improvisers or anything. They adhere to very strict structures.

"I think the intensity we get on record, and even more so live because it's more direct, is born of very minimal parts. Every part on that album – there's nothing very clever about any of it. It's all two or three note riffs and there's a massive intensity you get just out of playing those kind of things and making just very subtle changes. It's very minimal, everything that's being played live. I don't think there's any more than about six notes in any song. So it's almost like something outside makes for the experience because, if you analyse what we're actually doing, there's not really a lot of playing. Anybody could do it."

I doubt that. Intensity is notoriously difficult to capture on record.

"Yeah, it's intangible, isn't it? You can get a very intense record just with acoustic guitar and vocals. You can get a really intense acappella. I dunno, there's not an intensity unit in a studio that is gonna add intensity to the music. It's . . . uh . . . hahaha." He shrugs, but he's not being abstruse or obscure for any reason. He's not protecting a mystery or nurturing an image. If only he were! It strikes me that Jason is simply content not to know.

When I ask if he's never tempted to take it that one step further, to maybe entertain Joseph Campbell's notion of pop music as a necessary public mantra, or even to maybe agree with the hippies that music that makes you feel high puts you in touch with something spiritual, he shakes his head.

"No. No. That's very . . . I don't sit down and study as to why that works and whatever. It works, and I'm happy with that. I think we're blown away by the sounds that are coming out of Spiritualized because . . . well, basically, everybody knows exactly what everybody else is doing within the band but . . . uh . . . it's kind of like when you listen to music and you can hear harmonies and symphonies behind the music that aren't actually on the tape, that aren't actually on the record, y'know? I think that works on the album. There's a lot of sounds in there that aren't recorded, that aren't there but I can hear them, y'know?"

I don't think we're going to get any further so, to Jason's relief, I click off the tape. Then he says: "You know when you're really out-of-it, y'know, really smashed or drunk and you're passing out and you hear sounds like Suicide – Suicide the group, that is – in your head? Well, I used to try and get those sounds with Spacemen. I was always after getting those sounds. But it doesn't matter now. I don't force it. I've eased up. It's better."

Yeah, cos what if you'd ever done it?

"Exactly," he laughs. "There'd be nothing left to do."

"Lazer Guided Melodies" is out this week on Dedicated.